

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 2

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STAR WARS TAKING OFF AS U.S. SETS ROCKET TEST

SANTA BARBARA, Cal. — The U.S. is about to test its first anti-satellite space weapon, the White House announced yesterday.

The awesome Star Wars device can blow spy satellites out of the skies.

Presidential spokesman Larry Speakes said the test will be conducted within two weeks.

Congress had ordered in the 1986 defense budget that such a test could proceed only if President Reagan gave it the necessary certification at least 15 days beforehand.

Speakes said the exact date and target of the test are classified information.

He said the test is necessary to counter a similar system operated by the Soviets.

"They have one and they don't want us to have one," Speakes said.

He said the Soviets have been notified of the planned U.S. test.

The anti-satellite, or ASAT, weapon system includes a two-stage

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rocket carried high into the atmosphere by an F-15 fighter jet.

The rocket is then launched into space. Then its warhead, equipped with tiny rocket motors, homes in on a low-orbit satellite and destroys it by impact without using explosives.

Speakes, in California with the vacationing President, said the test — the first of three this year — would be conducted against an old, drifting U.S. satellite "which no longer has any utility."

The Air Force has conducted two firings of the missile, but neither was an actual test against an object in space.

Speakes said that following the experiment, the U.S. will disclose only in general terms whether it was successful or not.

The ASAT is designed to take out enemy spy

and communications satellites in time of war.

While supporting research and development funds for ASAT, Congress has balked at approving unlimited tests in hopes of achieving limits on anti-satellite weapons in the Geneva arms talks.

Speakes, noting such criticism, said the Reagan administration believes the test will provide "more incentive" for the Soviets to negotiate seriously about space-based weapons.

"The Soviet Union has for many years had the world's only operational anti-satellite system," Speakes said.

"The United States must develop its own ASAT capability in order to deter Soviet threats to U.S. and allied space systems."

The Soviets began experimenting with ASAT weapons in 1968. They are believed to have a crude but workable missile that could destroy some low-altitude American satellites.